Journal of Business and Management Studies
ISSN: 2709-0876
DOI: 10.32996/jbms
Journal Homepage: al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jbms/index

Community Participation in Local Food Systems: Unpacking Access, Affordability, and Trust in Farmers Markets

Jibin Baby ✉[1] **and Dusty Walter**[2]

[1] *Scientist, Central Missouri Research, Extension and Education Center, University of Missouri, Columbia - MO, USA*

[2] *Director, Central Missouri Research, Extension and Education Center, University of Missouri, Columbia - MO, USA*

Corresponding Author: Jibin Baby**, E-mail:** jibinbaby@missouri.edu

ABSTRACT

Farmers markets connect local producers and consumers while creating opportunities for community engagement and access to locally produced foods. However, participation may be constrained by structural and financial barriers and shaped by relationships between consumers and vendors. This study examined how accessibility, affordability, and trust shape community participation in farmers markets through the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups. Fifty-five semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with market visitors, farmers and vendors, market managers, and SNAP/WIC coordinators across eight farmers markets during 2025–2026. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings identified transportation difficulties, geographic distance, and operating schedules as barriers to access, although some visitors were willing to travel farther to obtain local produce and support their communities. Affordability reflected both financial constraints and perceived product value, with some consumers associating premium prices with freshness, quality, and familiarity with vendors. Community partnerships, financial incentives, and efforts to facilitate SNAP benefit use were identified as potential strategies for reducing financial barriers. Trust was associated with vendor familiarity, perceptions of responsible production practices, and direct consumer–vendor interactions. Overall, the findings suggest that farmers market participation is shaped by the interplay of practical accessibility, purchasing capacity, and relational experiences. Addressing structural and financial barriers while supporting information exchange and trusted consumer–vendor relationships may help foster more inclusive participation in local food systems.

KEYWORDS

Farmers markets; local food systems; affordability; trust

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 October 2026 **PUBLISHED:** 04 November 2026 **DOI:** 10.32996/jbms.2026.8.11.6

1. Introduction

Consumer interest in food quality, safety, transparency, and product origins has contributed to growing attention toward local food systems and alternative food retail channels (Aucoin & Fry, 2015; Baby & Joseph, 2023; Ma et al., 2024). Within this context, farmers markets provide opportunities for direct interactions between consumers (Aucoin & Fry, 2015; Baby & Joseph, 2023; Ma et al., 2024) and producers while facilitating access to fresh and locally produced agricultural products. In addition to facilitating access to local food, farmers' markets serve as community gathering spaces that promote social interaction and interpersonal relationships in ways that differ from conventional large-scale food retail environments. They also enhance the visibility of locally produced goods and provide opportunities for consumers to engage more directly with local producers (Aprile et al., 2016; Warsaw et al., 2021).

Food accessibility is an important issue that influences whether individuals and households can obtain affordable and nutritious foods. When healthy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, are not readily available within a community, residents may rely on convenience stores, where food options may be more expensive and offer fewer nutritious choices (Aku et al., 2018; Baby & Joseph, 2024; Larsen & Gilliland, 2009). Farmers' markets have the potential to improve food accessibility by bringing fresh fruits, vegetables, and other locally produced foods directly into communities. However, access to these markets depends on residents' abilities and community support more than their physical presence. Factors such as transportation, affordability, location, operating hours, and convenience can influence whether community members are able to participate (Aku et al., 2018; Baby & Kim, 2024;

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

Schupp, 2017). Therefore, evaluating farmers' market accessibility requires moving beyond determining whether a market exists and examining whether community members can realistically reach, afford, and utilize the foods and services offered at the market.

Farmers' markets must be perceived as affordable and responsive to the needs of low-income consumers. Although farmers' markets provide access to fresh and locally produced foods (Baby & Kim, 2025; Larsen & Gilliland, 2009), the prices of some products may remain difficult for low-income households to afford. In addition to food prices, transportation costs and other expenses associated with visiting farmers' markets can create further barriers to participation (Ghazaryan et al., 2018; Larsen & Gilliland, 2009; McGuirt et al., 2011). Programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other food incentive/support programs have the potential to increase the purchasing capacity of low-income consumers at farmers' markets. Therefore, it is important to assess whether consumers are aware of these programs, whether they participate in them, and whether farmers' markets accept and actively collaborate with nonprofit organizations and other community-based organizations to support low-income and food-insecure consumers.

Trust is widely recognized as an important factor in strengthening the resilience of local food systems. Previous research has associated local food purchasing with support for local communities and the development of relational trust between farmers and consumers. Within the farmers' market literature, direct relationships between farmers and consumers are frequently identified as a key foundation of trust. Such trust may develop through direct interactions (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002; Baby et al., 2023) with farmers, transparency regarding farming and production practices, and consumers' perceptions of product quality, freshness, and authenticity. Farmers' markets facilitate these interactions by providing consumers with opportunities to communicate directly with producers, ask questions about how food is grown and produced, and establish relationships with local vendors (Chen et al., 2019; Huseynov et al., 2022). However, uncertainty regarding product origins, pricing, production practices, or the authenticity of claims that products are locally produced may undermine consumer trust.

Access, affordability, and trust may be experienced and perceived differently by stakeholders depending on their roles and involvement in farmers markets. For instance, consumers encounter these factors through their purchasing decisions and market experiences, whereas farmers and vendors may view them in relation to product pricing, customer interactions, and market operations (Aucoin & Fry, 2015; Ma et al., 2024). Similarly, market managers may address accessibility, affordability, and trust from an organizational and operational perspective, while SNAP/WIC coordinators may provide insights into financial assistance programs and barriers faced by low-income consumers (Dannefer et al., 2015; Larimore, 2018). These differing perspectives highlight the importance of examining farmers' market participation through the experiences of multiple stakeholder groups.

Although existing research has examined accessibility, affordability, and consumer trust in farmers markets, these dimensions have often been considered separately, limiting our understanding of how they collectively shape community participation. Furthermore, integrating the perspectives of consumers, farmers and vendors, market managers, and nutrition assistance program coordinators may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and facilitating factors influencing farmers market participation across stakeholder groups. Accordingly, three research questions guided this study: (1) How do physical and structural factors, including transportation, market location, and operating hours, influence accessibility and community participation in farmers markets? (2) How do perceived price fairness, product value, and access to nutrition assistance programs shape affordability and participation in farmers markets? (3) How do perceptions of product quality, product origins, transparency, and consumer–vendor relationships influence trust and participation in farmers markets?

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate how accessibility, affordability, and trust influence community participation in farmers markets. The research was conducted at eight farmers markets in the Mid-Missouri region of the United States during 2025 and 2026. The selected markets varied in size and levels of community engagement, with estimated attendance ranging from approximately 500 to 2,000 visitors during peak market sessions. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives concerning the structural, economic, and relational factors that shape participation in farmers markets. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants based on their roles, experiences, and involvement in farmers markets. A total of 55 semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with four stakeholder groups: market visitors, farmers and vendors, market managers, and coordinators of SNAP / WIC.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide comprising 11 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and perspectives regarding farmers market participation. The interview protocol addressed three principal thematic areas. The first focused on participants' relationships with farmers markets, including their experiences, purchasing practices, and perceptions of changes in market participation over time. The second examined accessibility and affordability, with particular attention to transportation, market location, operating hours, perceived price fairness, and participants' awareness and use of nutrition assistance programs. The third explored trust and barriers to participation, including perceptions of product quality, product origins, pricing practices, consumer–vendor relationships, and factors perceived to limit broader community engagement. Interview data were documented through written field notes and audio recordings. Prior to data collection, the study received approval from the Institutional Review Board, and all research activities were conducted in accordance with the approved study protocol and applicable ethical requirements of the University of Missouri.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, incorporating both deductive and inductive approaches. The analysis involved familiarization with the interview data, generation of initial codes, grouping related codes into broader categories, identification of preliminary themes, and subsequent review and refinement of themes. During the coding process, participants' responses were examined to identify recurring patterns related to transportation and market accessibility, perceived price fairness, financial constraints, nutrition assistance programs, product quality, and consumer–vendor relationships. Related codes were organized into broader categories and subsequently developed into themes representing key barriers and facilitating factors influencing farmers' market participation. The identified themes were reviewed in relation to the research questions and across stakeholder perspectives to examine how structural, economic, and relational factors contributed to participants' experiences.

3. Results

3.1 Accessibility

Physical and structural accessibility emerged as an important consideration in participants' experiences of farmers markets. Although farmers markets provide opportunities to purchase fresh and locally produced foods, their presence in the community does not necessarily ensure that all residents can access them conveniently. Participants highlighted transportation availability and distance as factors influencing their ability to visit markets. One market visitor described the challenge of reaching the market, stating, "*For me, I face issues getting to the farmers market because of access to reliable transportation from my place*." This account illustrates how limited access to reliable transportation can create practical barriers to participation. In contrast, another visitor described traveling beyond their home county to access locally produced foods: "*I do not have a farmers' market in my county, so I travel to this location. Even if it is far and I still drive because I love local produce*." This account highlights how the absence of a nearby market can require additional travel, while also illustrating how interest in local produce may motivate consumers to overcome distance-related challenges. Together, these accounts demonstrate that accessibility is shaped by both transportation constraints and the geographic availability of farmers markets.

In addition to transportation, market operating hours and location influenced participants' experiences of accessibility and convenience. A visitor suggested that existing market schedules may not accommodate everyone's work commitments and daily routines. One participant suggested offering markets on alternative days, explaining, "*I heard of some markets with high footfalls work on one of the weekdays like Tuesdays or Wednesday's evening, at least during summer, and so that timing can be adjusted. As I work on Saturdays, I miss some market days*." This account highlights how scheduling may limit participation among individuals whose work commitments conflict with regular market hours. Location and convenience also shaped participants' decisions to visit farmers markets. Another visitor noted, "*It's far from my house and I do have a Walmart nearby. But I love local produce and thought to support my community*." This statement illustrates the tension between the convenience of nearby conventional food retailers and the motivation to purchase local produce despite the additional travel involved. Together, these accounts suggest that market schedules and geographic convenience influence opportunities for participation, even among individuals who value local food and wish to support their communities.

3.2 Affordability

Affordability emerged as a multidimensional issue involving perceived price fairness, product value, and consumers' financial capacity. Participants associated the value of farmers market products with their freshness, quality, and distinctive characteristics. One visitor explained, "*I always come here to get fresh baked bread and organic honey*," illustrating how particular products contributed to their market experience. Another participant expressed a willingness to pay a higher price because of an established relationship with a producer, stating, *"I am ready for a slightly premium price as I know the vendor who grows it and I have been buying from him*." This account suggests that familiarity with vendors and confidence in their products may influence consumers' evaluations of price and value. However, willingness to pay a premium does not necessarily indicate that products are affordable for all consumers, as financial constraints may still limit purchasing capacity. The findings therefore highlight the distinction between perceived product value and consumers' ability to purchase farmers market products regularly.

Nutrition assistance programs and community-based financial incentives emerged as potential mechanisms for improving financial accessibility. A market manager described partnerships with local financial institutions to support lower-income households, explaining, "*We have local businesses like local credit unions providing dollar-matching programs for low-income households, and they can register and access benefits from the counter*." This account illustrates how community partnerships may help extend consumers' purchasing power. Similarly, a SNAP coordinator emphasized efforts to facilitate the use of nutrition assistance benefits at farmers markets, stating, "*We are making sure and trying our best for all the SNAP holders to make it usable at the farmers market*." This perspective highlights the importance of making existing benefits practically accessible to consumers. Together, these accounts suggest that improving affordability involves not only the perceived fairness of product prices but also the availability of financial incentives and accessible payment mechanisms that enable consumers to purchase the foods they value.

3.3 Trust

Trust emerged as an important facilitator of positive farmers' market experiences. Participants associated confidence in market products with vendor familiarity, perceptions of responsible production practices, and information about how products were produced. One visitor explained, "*I have been coming here for at least three years, and I know a few vendors growing the produce*

responsibly and organically." This account illustrates how repeated market visits and familiarity with individual vendors may contribute to consumers' confidence in the products they purchase. From the vendor perspective, a honey seller emphasized adherence to production guidelines, stating, "*As a honey seller, we follow all USDA guidelines for the organic produce*." This statement reflects the importance of production practices and standards in vendors' accounts of product credibility. Together, these accounts highlight how familiarity with producers and information about production practices can contribute to consumers' perceptions of trust in farmers market products.

Direct interactions between consumers and vendors further illustrated the relational dimension of trust. A vendor described the importance of regular customers, stating, "*I have my regulars who come during the whole summer to get fresh produce from me*." This account highlights the recurring interactions that can develop between vendors and consumers over a market season. A visitor similarly emphasized the value of personal interaction, explaining, "*That is the difference with the grocery store here in the market. I need that experience where the seller can describe how he produces this, and he is ready to spend as much time as needed to explain the produce. I like those conversations*." This account illustrates how opportunities to ask questions and receive information directly from vendors contribute to the distinctiveness of the farmers' market experience. The visitor's emphasis on these conversations suggests that direct communication provides opportunities to learn about production practices and develop familiarity with vendors. Collectively, these accounts highlight how repeated interactions, information exchange, and opportunities to engage directly with producers contribute to positive consumer–vendor relationships and perceptions of trust in farmers markets.

4. Discussion

This study explored how accessibility, affordability, and trust shape community participation in farmers markets, highlighting the interconnected structural, economic, and relational factors that influence market experiences. The findings indicate that transportation challenges, geographic distance, and market operating schedules can limit participation, even among consumers who value locally produced foods and wish to support their communities. Affordability emerged as more than a question of price, reflecting consumers' perceptions of freshness, quality, and relationships with familiar vendors, while also highlighting the financial constraints that may limit purchasing opportunities for some households. Community partnerships, financial incentives, and efforts to facilitate SNAP benefit use were identified as potential mechanisms for improving financial accessibility. Trust was reinforced through repeated interactions with vendors, familiarity with producers, and opportunities to obtain information about production practices and product origins. Collectively, these findings suggest that participation in farmers markets depends not only on consumer interest in local foods but also on the ability to access markets, afford their products, and develop confidence in the people who produce and sell them.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing accessibility, affordability, and trust collectively to promote broader and more inclusive participation in local food systems. Improving transportation options, introducing flexible market schedules, strengthening nutrition assistance programs, and expanding community-based incentive initiatives may help mitigate structural and financial barriers to participation. Furthermore, transparent communication regarding production practices and opportunities for direct interactions between consumers and vendors may foster trust and enhance overall market experiences. Collaboration among market managers, vendors, and community organizations may also play an important role in developing inclusive market environments that respond to the diverse needs of local communities. The findings further suggest that coordinated efforts among these stakeholder groups may contribute to addressing participation barriers more effectively. However, these findings should be interpreted within the context of this qualitative study conducted across eight farmers markets in Mid-Missouri and should not be generalized to all farmers markets or consumer populations. Future research could examine how accessibility, affordability, and trust vary across geographic and socioeconomic contexts and evaluate the extent to which targeted interventions influence market participation over time. Overall, this study provides insights into the interconnected roles of structural conditions, economic considerations, and interpersonal relationships in shaping farmers market participation, highlighting the importance of integrated approaches to improving accessibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness within local food systems.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Aku, A., Mshenga, P., Afari-Sefa, V., & Ochieng, J. (2018). Effect of market access provided by farmer organizations on smallholder vegetable farmer's income in Tanzania. *Cogent Food & Agriculture*, *4*(1), 1560596.

[2] Alfonso, M. L., Nickelson, J., & Cohen, D. (2012). Farmers' markets in rural communities: A case study. *American Journal of Health Education*, *43*(3), 143-151.

[3] Andreatta, S., & Wickliffe, W. (2002). Managing farmer and consumer expectations: A study of a North Carolina farmers market. *Human Organization*, *61*(2), 167-176.

[4] Aprile, M. C., Caputo, V., & Nayga Jr, R. M. (2016). Consumers' preferences and attitudes toward local food products. *Journal of food products marketing*, *22*(1), 19-42.

[5] Aucoin, M., & Fry, M. (2015). Growing local food movements: Farmers' markets as nodes for products and community. *The Geographical Bulletin*, *56*(2), 1.

[6] Baby, J., & Joseph, A. G. (2023). Influence of travelers' pro-environmental behavior and support of the local economy towards purchase intention of local foods. *International Journal of Food Science and Agriculture*, *7*(3), 1152.

[7] Baby, J., & Joseph, A. G. (2024). Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior in local food purchasing. *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Systems*, *17*(1), 19.

[8] Baby, J., & Kim, D. Y. (2024). Sustainable agritourism for farm profitability: Comprehensive evaluation of visitors' intrinsic motivation, environmental behavior, and satisfaction. *Land*, *13*(9), 1466.

[9] Baby, J., & Kim, D. Y. (2025). Atmosphere, Service, and Flavor: Exploring Quality Dimensions of Farm-Raised Foods in Agritourism. *Tourism and Hospitality*, *6*(4), 165.

[10] Baby, J., Lee, S., & Kim, D. Y. (2023). Accidents? Not me: The impact of optimism bias on visitor perceptions in cultural festivals. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*, *24*(3), 223-245.

[11] Chen, L. A., Miranda, B. V., Parcell, J. L., & Chen, C. (2019). The foundations of institutional-based trust in farmers' markets. *Agriculture and Human Values*, *36*(3), 395-410.

[12] Dannefer, R., Abrami, A., Rapoport, R., Sriphanlop, P., Sacks, R., & Johns, M. (2015). A mixed-methods evaluation of a SNAP-Ed farmers' market–based nutrition education program. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, *47*(6), 516-525.

[13] Ghazaryan, A., Westgren, R., Parcell, J., & Gedikoglu, H. (2018). Factors affecting farmers market produce prices in Missouri. *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, *24*(8), 927-945.

[14] Huseynov, S., Taylor, M. R., & Martinez, C. (2022). Farmers and bakers: The role of optimism bias in price expectations. *AgEcon*, *24725*.

[15] Larimore, S. (2018). Cultural boundaries to access farmers markets accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). *Qualitative Sociology*, *41*(1), 63-87.

[16] Larsen, K., & Gilliland, J. (2009). A farmers' market in a food desert: Evaluating impacts on the price and availability of healthy food. *Health & place*, *15*(4), 1158-1162.

[17] Ma, W., Sonobe, T., & Gong, B. (2024). Linking farmers to markets: Barriers, solutions, and policy options. *Economic Analysis and Policy*, *82*, 1102-1112.

[18] McGuirt, J. T., Jilcott, S. B., Liu, H., & Ammerman, A. S. (2011). Produce price savings for consumers at farmers' markets compared to supermarkets in North Carolina. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, *6*(1), 86-98.

[19] Schupp, J. L. (2017). Cultivating better food access? The role of farmers' markets in the US local food movement. *Rural Sociology*, *82*(2), 318-348.

[20] Warsaw, P., Archambault, S., He, A., & Miller, S. (2021). The economic, social, and environmental impacts of farmers markets: Recent evidence from the US. *Sustainability*, *13*(6), 3423.